

AN ARTIST SPEAKS BLUNTLY

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I address myself to bigots—those who are so inadvertently, those who are cold and premeditated with it. I address myself to those “in” white hipsters who think niggers never had it so good (Crow Jim) and that it’s time something was done about restoring the traditional privileges that have always accrued to the whites exclusively (Jim Crow). I address myself to sensitive chauvinists—the greater part of the white intelligentsia—and the insensitive, with whom the former have this in common: the uneasy awareness that “Jass” is an ofay’s word for a nigger’s music (*viz.* Duke and Pulitzer).

I address myself to George Russell, a man whose work I have always respected and admired, who in an inopportune moment with an ill-chosen phrase threw himself squarely into the enemy camp. I address myself to Leonard Feather, who was quick to exploit that phrase and a few others, and who has asked me to be in his *Encyclopedia of Jazz* (I prefer to be in *Who’s Who*; they at least know that reference works are about men and not the reverse). I address myself to Buck Walmsley, to Don DeMicheal and Dan Morgenstern, in short, to that entire “critical community” that has had far more access to this and other media of communication than I and fellows of my sort.

Allow me to say that I am—with men of other complexions, dispositions, etc.—about Art. I have about 15 years of dues-paying—others have spent more—which permits me to speak with some authority about the crude stables (clubs) where black men are groomed and paced like thoroughbreds to run till they bleed or else are hacked up outright for Lepage’s glue.

I am about 28 years in these United States, which, in my estimation is one of the most vicious, racist social systems in the world—with the possible exceptions of Northern Rhodesia, South Africa, and South Viet Nam. I am, for the moment, a helpless witness to the bloody massacre of my people on streets that run from Hayneville through Harlem. I watch them die. I pray that I don’t die. I’ve seen the once children-now men of my youth get down on scag, shoot it in the fingers, and then expire on frozen tenement roofs or in solitary basements, where all our frantic thoughts raced to the same desperate conclusion: “I’m sorry it was him; glad it wasn’t me.”

I have seen the tragedy of perennially starving families, my own. I am that tragedy. I am the host of the dead: Bird, Billie, Ernie, Sonny, whom you, white America, murdered out of a systematic and unloving disregard. I am a nigger shooting heroin at 15 and dead at 35 with hog's head cheeses for arms and horse for blood.

But I am more than the images you superimpose on me, the despair that you inflict. I am the persistent insistence of the human heart to be free. I wish to regain that cherished dignity that was always mine. My esthetic answer to your lies about me is a simple one: you can no longer defer my dream. I'm gonna sing it. Dance it. Scream it. And if need be, I'll steal it from this very earth.

Get down with me, white folks. Go where I go. But think this: injustice is rife. Fear of the truth will out. The murder of James Powell, the slaughter of 30 Negroes in Watts, the wake of Chu-Lai are crimes that would make God's left eye jump. That establishment that owns the pitifully little that is left of me can absolve itself only through the creation of equitable relationships among all men, or else the world will create for itself new relationships that exclude the entrepreneur and the procurer. Some of you are becoming a little frightened that we—niggers—ain't keepin' this thing simple enough. "The sound of surprise"? Man, you don't want no surprises from me.

How do I know that?

Give me leave to state this unequivocal fact: jazz is the product of the whites—the ofays—too often my enemy. It is the progeny of the blacks—my kinsmen. By this I mean: you own the music, and we make it. By definition, then, you own the people who make the music. You own us in whole chunks of flesh. When you dig deep inside our already disemboweled corpses and come up with a solitary diamond—because you don't want to flood the market—how different are you from the DeBeers of South Africa or the profligates who fleeced the Gold Coast? All right, there are niggers with a million dollars but ain't no nigger got a *billion* dollars.

I give you, then, my brains back, America. You have had them before, as you had my father's, as you took my mother's: in outhouses, under the back porch, next to black snakes who should have bitten you then.

I ask only: don't you ever wonder just what my collective rage will—as it surely must—be like, when it is—as it inevitably will be—unleashed? Our vindication will be black as the color of suffering is black, as Fidel is black, as Ho Chi Minh is black.

It is thus that I offer my right hand across the worlds of suffering to black compatriots everywhere. When they fall victim to war, disease, poverty—all systematically enforced—I fall with them, and I am a yellow skin, and they are black like me or even white. For them and me I offer this prayer, that this 28th year of mine will never again find us all so poor, nor the rapine forces of the world in such sanguinary circumstances.

And you can tell Ira Gitler that he is a fool. “Repelled flies” indeed! What a thing it is to play God, snuff out yet born professional lives with impunity—worse, ignorance.

To Walmsley: one of the most thrilling musical experiences of my life was to play for the people of Chicago. You know it was amid cries of “MORE” that we were reluctantly allowed to leave that stage that night. You didn’t seem to be able to muster the journalistic honesty to report that, though. Perhaps the jeers you heard were produced in that crabbed, frightened illogicality of your own post-R&B consciousness. Your patent opinions were predictable, your tastes alarmingly similar: Stanley, Woody, and Gary.

I leave you with this for what it’s worth. I am an antifascist artist. My music is functional. I play about the death of me by you. I exult in the life of me in spite of you. I give some of that life to you whenever you listen to me, which right now is never. My music is for the people. If you are a bourgeois, then you must listen to it on my terms. I will not let you misconstrue me. That era is over. If my music doesn’t suffice, I will write you a poem, a play. I will say to you in every instance, “Strike the Ghetto. Let my people go.”
